

CHINA'S IMMEDIATE AND LONG-TERM OBJECTIVES IN AFGHANISTAN IN THE POST 2014 SCENARIO

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ABSTRACT

Afghanistan has a unique and indeed, an unparalleled significance in the strategic calculus of contemporary China. The geopolitics of this Chinese neighbourhood have four glaring peculiarities; security, strategic, political and economic. In the rapidly changing global environment, these aspects ask for a deeper cooperation between China and Afghanistan and for a regional integration of all those countries looking for regional peace and harmony, based on mutual respect and sovereignty. The central argument of this research is based upon the postulation that, in the post 2014 scenario, 'constructive engagement with Afghanistan will be crucial for China's national interests in Eurasia'. In the academic sphere, the argument is strongly supported by realist school of thought. It directly correlates with China's own national security; a fragmented, fundamentalist and anarchic Afghanistan post 2014 would stand contrary to China's interest of maintaining stability and defying the ongoing militancy in its autonomous region, Xinjiang. Whereas security may be the immediate objective, the long-term aim is economic and strategic cooperation with Afghanistan which is driven by the liberal paradigm which China finds as the most crucial and enduring. Indeed, pursuing a realist based national security and strategic paradigm and a liberalist based idea of economic cooperation with Afghanistan is China's strategy towards Afghanistan.

KEYWORDS: China's Immediate and Long-term Objectives, Regional Integration, Autonomous Region, Xinjiang

INTRODUCTION

While eyeing at Chinese role in Afghanistan, the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, visited China soon after taking over the power. Whereas, Afghans look towards China for a major role both in its economic development as well as the security stabilization, China seems forthcoming

While the contemporary developments in the bilateral relationship of both countries are in the making, the Sino-Afghan relationship dates back to centuries. Ahmed Shah Abdali (Durrani) amalgamated the current Afghan territory in the 18th Century after defeating Mongols and Persians, into a larger, yet unhinged Afghan Empire. The rugged Afghan mountains and narrow valleys have attracted settlers from all around. They include Persians under Darius the Great (522-486 BCE) and Greeks under Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE). There has been a huge impact of Buddhism on the lives of people of this country from 7th century B.C to 1st century CE.¹ Besides, it had the influence of Turks, Arabs, and Mongols.²

¹Hamid Wahed Alikuzai, *A Concise History of Afghanistan in 25 Volumes*, (USA: Trafford Publishers, 2013), 57.

² "A Brief History of Afghanistan", Issue 417, *New International Magazine*, 2008, accessed <http://newint.org/features/2008/11/01/afghanistan-history/>.

Historian Arnold Toynbee has described Afghanistan as the “roundabout of the ancient world.”³ Indeed, this terrain has been a junction of the land routes from China and India to the West and a place of convergence for numerous and dynamic nations and cultures. Afghanistan indeed is a bridge between the present day South Asia, Central Asia, West Asia and East Asia. Over the years, the migrants who passed through this region left behind “a mosaic of ethnic and linguistic groups.”⁴ Thus, Afghanistan is truly a multi-cultural land.

Owing to the global power play between the major contenders, Afghanistan underwent foreign invasions and intrusions more than once, mainly owing to its geopolitical location. In recent history, following the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989,⁵ U.S being the key beneficiary of the covert campaign left the region in haste. In the absence of any substantial representative and consensus Government in Kabul, factional fighting prevailed until the administration was taken up by religiously motivated Taliban in the middle of 1990s.⁶ Coldblooded in nature, Taliban neither succeeded in securing public acceptance at home, nor win the recognition of international community.⁷ The failure was mutual. In the post 9/11 scenario, the US led NATO action also could neither subdue the Taliban, nor could they reinstate stability in the war-ravaged Afghanistan. The US agenda to occupy Afghanistan was in line with Dr. Brzezinski’s geostrategic imperative of “managing” Eurasia.⁸ It aimed at gaining accesses to and in turn, greater influence in the Eurasian Heartland. The strategy hinged upon containment and not cooperation with China. Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski writes in *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* “for America, the chief geopolitical prize is Eurasia...how America manages Eurasia is critical”.⁹

How successful the US strategy has been is another debate, but what is established is that after almost fourteen years of military commove, the US led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), has finally decided to pullout maximum combat forces from Afghanistan, still leaving 15000 US troops on nine strategic bases. While ambiguity about the future US plans still exists between State Department and Pentagon, there are new regional alignments in the making. In this regard, after a prolong silence, the People’s Republic of China; geographically contiguous to Afghanistan implied for the first time in June 2012 that it would play a major role in the stabilization of Afghanistan in the post 2014 scenario. The apparent Chinese role can be inferred from the statement of its former President, Mr. Hu Jintao, who clearly envisioned that, “We will continue to manage regional affairs by ourselves, guarding against shocks from turbulence outside the region, and will play a bigger role in Afghanistan’s peaceful reconstruction.”¹⁰

China has already made huge financial investments for the development of Afghanistan’s mineral sector. As a

³Peter R. Blood Ed., *Afghanistan: Past and Present /Comprised of Afghanistan, a Country Study and Country Profile: Afghanistan, Alfred Aghajanian* (Compiler), (Los Angeles; IndoEuropean Publishing 2007), 3.

⁴Muhammad Saleem Mazhar, Samee Ozair Khan and Naheed S. Goraya, “Post 2014-Afghanistan South Asian Studies”, *Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1, (January – June 2013): 67-84.

⁵ Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress Eds., *The Russian General Staff, The Soviet -Afghan War: How a Super Power Fought and Lost*, (Kanas: University Press of Kanas, 2002), 6.

⁶Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2001), 239.

⁷ Ibid., 5

⁸⁸ Joseph E. Phallon, “U.S. GeoPolitics: Afghanistan and the Containment of China”, *Small Wars Journal*, August 12, 2013, accessed <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/us-geopolitics-afghanistan-and-the-containment-of-china>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰Gleb Bryanski and Chris Buckley, “China's Hu Sees Role for Regional Bloc in Afghanistan”, *Chicago Tribune*, June 6, 2012, accessed http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-06-06/news/sns-rt-us-china-russia-hu-afghanistanbre85504t-20120605_1_afghanistan-sco-china-s-hu.

rising power and major Afghan neighbour, China has lot at stake in Afghanistan, including security concerns to its own western autonomous region, Xinjiang. Consequently, restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan is in the interest of China, besides this being vital for the prosperity of the Afghan masses. Moreover, China has sufficient resources for making long-term investments in Afghanistan. Besides this, the determined Chinese leadership has the strong will to strengthen communication, coordination and collaboration in dealing with major international and regional issues. China is analysing new cooperation models and suggesting ways to identify non-resource sectors as a new priority for economic cooperation in Afghanistan and the region. Apart from its own interest for stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan, there is acceptability for China's increased role in Afghanistan amongst the masses and leadership alike.

It was in fact the geopolitical location of Afghanistan, which attracted global occupying powers from Alexander to former Soviet Union, and now NATO and US. After the longest military engagement, United States and NATO have ultimately reached to the conclusion that, it is not possible to subdue the Afghan masses although it was relatively easier to over through the Taliban Government. Consequently, after a costly war, which seriously undermined US priorities both domestically and internationally, The Trans-Atlantic alliance, indeed US, has pulled out maximum combat forces, leaving behind 10,000-12,000 troops through a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), signed by President Asharaf Ghani in 2014.¹¹

Chronology of Sino-Afghan Relationship

The history of Sino-Afghan relationship can be traced back to 7th Century, once Chinese Monks use to travel to Afghanistan through Silk Road to Buddha statues in Bamyian province of Afghanistan.¹² The Afghan land had once been the focus of Buddhism. Under Buddhism, by 500 B.C, Kandahar and Heart provinces (then known Arachosia and Aria) were considered as the jewels of the world. Buddhist rule on Afghanistan remained from 650-321 B.C (the Mauryan Age).¹³ The largest Buddha statue (one thousand meters long, Sleeping Buddha statue) was made in the Bamyian province.

There were twelve small and large Buddhist monarchies in Afghanistan; Kingdom of Bactria with its capital at Kandahar as the biggest and most significant.¹⁴ Indeed, the Buddha statues of Bamyian (destroyed by Taliban in March 2001) had greater attraction for Chinese people, apart from many followers of this religion.¹⁵

During the recent digging at the Aynak copper mines, some archaeological sites have been found which are part of Afghanistan's cultural heritage and also of Chinese interests. Afghan and foreign archaeologists and historians have repeatedly highlighted the cross-border cultural links interspersed throughout this region, and the Buddha's at Aynak have some cultural significance to China. These sites are also part of China's history. According to China, "this is China's neighborhood, and they are committed to making sure it works out well."¹⁶

Through the extensive use of the Silk Road, a robust trade relationship existed between Asia and Europe. While China used to be the hub of Asian trade, Afghanistan has been the key transit trade, between the two continents; Asia and

¹¹ John Kerry, Secretary of State, "Chronology of Sino-Afghan Relationship- The Loya Jirga and the U.S.-Afghanistan Bilateral Security Agreement", *Press Statement of US Department of State*, November 24, 2013, Washington, DC, accessed <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/11/218031.htm>.

¹² "Afghanistan Now Part of China's Central Asian Push", *China Briefing*, September 23, 2008, accessed <http://www.china-briefing.com/news/2008/09/23/afghanistan-now-part-of-chinas-central-asian-push.html>.

¹³ Hamid Wahed Alikuzai, *a Concise History of Afghanistan in 25 Volumes*, 57.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58

¹⁵ "Cultural Landscape and Archaeological Remains of the Bamiyan Valley", accessed <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/208>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 821

Europe. The cordial Sino-Afghan relationship has been through ages. After the re-positioning of global power centres, sequel to World War-II, Modern China, People's Republic of China and Afghanistan established their bilateral relationship in 1950s.

The diplomatic relationships however, were established between the two neighbours in 1957. During the Cold war era, Chinese Prime Minister, Mr Zhu Enlai visited Afghanistan in 1957. Earlier, Prime Minister Daud Khan paid a visit to Peking in the same year. These visits strengthened the bilateral relationship between Afghanistan and the People's Republic of China. The Sino-Afghan Treaty of Friendship and Non-Aggression was signed in August-1960.¹⁷ Thereafter, the Peking Treaty of formal demarcation of boundary between China and Afghanistan was signed in 1963, thus settling the 76 Kilometres long border issues forever.¹⁸

Being a signatory of 'Good Neighbour' Declaration-2002, China has pledged to respect Afghanistan's independence and territorial integrity. Indeed, there has never been any dispute between both countries since the beginning of the bilateral relationship in 1950s; something that could perhaps be exceptional in the realm of international relations. In the recent history, Sino-Afghan relations transformed after the downfall of Taliban regime in 2001.

Within the regional context, Afghanistan's relations with China are likely to figure out much, both during the ongoing transition period and in the post-2014 scenario, as China is the most powerful country in the region with a thriving economy besides having the will to play a positive role in Afghanistan. China, as an economic power and neighbour can play a key role to help Afghanistan overcome the legacy of decades of devastating war. On its part, Afghanistan can offer China the easiest transport route for exploitation of energy and mineral resources within Afghanistan and in its neighbouring region of Central Asia and Caucasus.¹⁹

On the other hand, today thousands of Afghan citizens acquire visas to travel to China in order to find good opportunities for business and trade. In addition to this, there are hundreds of Chinese citizens living and working in Afghanistan. The significance of Sino-Afghan relationship is that China has never had any political or ideological conflicts with Afghanistan, providing it with a special opportunity, unavailable to those countries that are apparently struggling to stabilize and democratize Afghanistan for their vested interests. "They are rare among the actors in Afghanistan in that they are not seen as having been too close to any side of the conflict. All sides are happy to see China's expanded role."²⁰ Indeed, China is distinguished among all other actors in Afghanistan, because it has not taken sides in the Afghan conflict. All sides, both internal and external should be pleased to see China's expanding and in the stabilizing role. It has a balanced relationship with all Afghan ethnic groups, instead of favouring any particular faction. According to Andrew Small, a US based Chinese expert, "China is the only actor which can foot the level of investment needed in Afghanistan to make it

¹⁷Sefat Rahimi, "The Emerging Sino-Afghan political and economic relations", *Political, Economic and Cultural*, October 1, 2008, accessed <http://sefatrahimi.blogspot.com/2008/10/emerging-sino-afghan-political-and.html>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ It is pertinent to state that being advance country China still needs to make better relations and excellent market opportunities by making cooperation and transfer of technology as well. For this purpose, China has to create a demand market as well. In addition, for market access to other states Afghanistan is a better choice for China.

²⁰ Denis D. Gray, "Eyeing Rich Bounty, China in Line for Afghan Role" *Saturday Salon*, Jan 26, 2013, accessed http://www.salon.com/2013/01/26/eyeing_rich_bounty_china_in_line_for_afghan_role/.

succeed and stick it out.”²¹

The geo-economic significance of Afghanistan as well as Chinese huge investments in Afghanistan should be an urge for both countries to further expand relations and economic cooperation. Currently, several Chinese companies are engaged in various economic and construction activities in Afghanistan. As Afghanistan has enormous energy and mineral resources, therefore, it is likely that China would be largest investor in its economic uplift. The payoff for China could be enormous, despite having provided little aid and no blood over the last decade. In October 2009, Sultan Ahmad Baheen, Afghanistan's ambassador to China stated that, “We believe that Afghanistan should be the ground for cooperation of civilizations, not the competition between the countries. I think there is room for everyone in Afghanistan.”²² Indeed, China will be the natural beneficiary of a stable Afghanistan.

Chinese Role in the Economic Development of Afghanistan

Sino-Afghan political relationship, economic cooperation and trade relations date back to the era of Silk Road. However, formalization of this relationship was formalized through the ‘Treaty of Economic and Technical Cooperation-1964.’ In the recent years, trade between the two countries has steadily increased and China has emerged to be one of the main exporters to Afghanistan in the past decade. The Sino-Afghan trade has already reached over \$700 million. A look at China-Afghan Trade volume highlights certain facts which prove that environment in Afghanistan is conducive for China’s business interests. The Trade volume just between 2002 and 2010 remained considerably high i.e. China’s export volume increased to \$ million 704 from \$ million 19.91. Whereas there is small but significant increase in China’s import volume increased from \$ million 0.08 to \$ million 11.70.²³ The Afghan Government and the donor agencies for diverse areas of reconstruction activities are contracting a number of Chinese companies.

Afghanistan has been gifted rich natural resources by nature, which include extensive deposits of copper, iron, coal, marble, precious metals, lithium, gemstones and above all hydrocarbons, some of which have been discovered and most remain un-explored, owing to the ongoing conflict. According to Afghan and American Geological Surveys, conducted between 2007-2009, deposits of copper, mercury, rare-earth elements, sulfur, chromites, asbestos, potash, graphite, and sand and gravel were found in over 20 mineralized areas. The survey reveals that, “The most significant known metal deposits are of copper and iron. The total copper resource in Afghanistan is nearly 60 million metric tons of copper of which the sediment-hosted copper deposits at Aynak are estimated to contain nearly 30 million metric tons copper. Resources in undiscovered porphyry copper and skarn deposits are estimated to be about 28.5 million metric tons of copper, with additional molybdenum, gold, and silver resources. Sedimentary iron deposits are abundant, and the Haji Gak and surrounding deposits are estimated to contain about 2,260 million metric tons of iron ore with grades higher than 62 weight percent iron. Additional resources in similar deposits are likely.”²⁴

During the first decade of the 21st Century, trade between China and Afghanistan has steadily increased and China

²¹ Wadsam, “China has its Eyes on Afghanistan’s Minerals”, *Afghan Business News Portal*, January 27, 2013, accessed <http://www.wadsam.com/china-has-its-eyes-on-afghanistans-minerals-2342/>.

²² Anthony Kuhn, “China Becomes A Player in Afghanistan's Future”, *NRP News*, October 21, 2009, accessed <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=113967842>

²³ Zhao Huasheng, “China and Afghanistan China’s Interests, Stances, and Perspectives”, *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, March 2012, 7

²⁴ Ibid.

has emerged as one of the main exporters to Afghanistan. China is making substantive contributions in terms of developing the natural resources and infrastructure of Afghanistan. In 2007, Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC) and Jiangxi Copper Corporation (JCCL) agreed to make the single largest foreign investment of \$3.5 billion in Afghanistan²⁵ by winning a tender to develop what geologists believe is the world's second largest undeveloped copper deposit at Aynak in Logar Province, 35 kilometers southeast of Kabul. These copper deposits are estimated to be worth \$1-\$3 trillion.²⁶

Indeed, China became the first foreign country in decades to sign an oil exploration deal with Afghanistan, which will make possible for the later to earn \$7 billion²⁷ over next 25 years. In 2011, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and its Afghan partner, Watan Oil & Gas, secured the rights to three oil blocks in the provinces of Sari-i-Pul and Faryab in northwestern Afghanistan.²⁸ China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and its Afghan partner are exploring crude oil from Amu Darya River Basin oil deposits in northern Afghan region. Amu Darya River Basin deposits are of more than 87 million barrels of crude oil reserves.²⁹ Besides this, Northern Afghanistan region is believed to contain more than 1.6 billion barrels of crude oil, 16 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 500 million barrels of natural liquids gas.³⁰ China has initially invested \$400 million³¹ for the oil exploration in these oilfields in Afghanistan.

The general perception is that the Chinese provide economic assistance in the form of part and parcel of the bid which makes it uncompetitive for anyone else to bid against Chinese companies. On the other hand, China has offered to build a power plant and a railroad to service the mine, which could nearly multiply the investment and will be beneficial for the population with civic facilities for the local population. It is interesting to note that while U.S. troops risk their lives in Afghanistan, it is Chinese companies that reap the economic benefits.³²

Wakhan Corridor and New Eurasian Land Bridge

Afghanistan desires that China construct a direct road link to open the narrow Afghan-China border through Wakhan Corridor across the remote 47-mile border between the two countries. Even US once desired opening of the Wakhan Corridor as an alternate logistics route for troops and supplies moving into Afghanistan. Indeed, what China is looking at, through land route via Wakhan corridor, is to link Afghanistan to Central Asia and then to Europe and warm waters of Gulf which will be a move towards China's New Eurasian Land Bridge. According to Afghan Ambassador to China, Afghan Government has asked Beijing to open the narrow Afghan-China border. "If we have this link, for sure the Afghan people will benefit from this way. So this is why we proposed to the Chinese to build a road, even a railroad from

²⁵ Erica S. Downs, "China Buys into Afghanistan", February 21, 2013, the SAIS Review, Volume XXXII, No. 2 (Summer-Fall 2012): 65-84, accessed <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2013/02/21-china-afghanistan-downs>.

²⁶ "Minerals program", *United States Geological Survey*, accessed https://gsa.confex.com/gsa/2007AM/finalprogram/abstract_127010.htm.

²⁷ AFP, "Afghanistan Signs First Major Oil Deal with China", *Space Daily*, December 28, 2011, accessed December 16, 2013, http://www.spacedaily.com/reports/Afghanistan_signs_first_major_oil_deal_with_China_999.html

²⁸ Erica S. Downs, China Buys into Afghanistan, February 21, 2013, *SAIS Review*, Volume XXXII, No. 2 (Summer-Fall 2012), 65-84

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Mirwais Harooni, "Update 1-Afghanistan Signs Major Oil Deal with China's CNPC", *Reuters*, December 28, 2011, accessed <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/28/afghanistan-cnpc-idUSL3E7NS40J20111228>.

³² Kobo-Daishi, "Can Envision A Time When China & Afghanistan Share An Open Border", *Our World Forum II at Asiawind*, September 21, 2009.

this Wakhan Corridor to Afghanistan.”³³



Credit: Alyson Hurt / NPR

The West has spoken a great deal about a “regional strategy” as the key to Afghanistan's future. However, China is the one that is actually implementing such an approach, suggesting that in the future Beijing will have much more of an impact on the region than Washington. “The deal is a way of getting a foot inside the door. China is looking towards a much bigger scale of investment. This could involve projects in infrastructure, including high-speed rail in times to come.”³⁴

In the discussion of a New Silk Road by former US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, hearkens back to historic East-West links and suggests a long-term investment in the region, China’s new Eurasian land bridge that is under construction. Linking Afghanistan to Central Asia—by developing direct land links between China, Europe and warm waters in the Gulf using a mesh of rail and road links—shows China is a serious, capable and long-term player in the region.

Security and Sino-Afghan Strategic Relationship

In June 2012, China and Afghanistan decided to form a framework for strategic cooperation between the two countries both sides agreeing to bring about the strategic cooperation based on the UN charter and historic friendship. The strategic cooperation would guard national interests of both the countries, strengthen efforts for maintaining historic friendship between the two sides and develop support in political, financial, cultural and security sectors. Both countries decided to support mutual issues of national integrity, unity and protection of land and not to let their soil to be used against the other side.

Whereas, the incumbent President is more than willing for joint strategy to fight out terrorism, the former Afghan President Karzai, during his meeting with former Chinese President Mr Hu in Beijing, agreed to step up cooperation in security and the fight against terrorism, as well as increase intelligence sharing. China is trying to ensure that a Muslim separatist group: East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in a western Chinese Xinjiang region does not benefit from the

³³ Anthony Kuhn, “China becomes a Player in Afghanistan's Future”, *NPR*, August 22, 2009, accessed <http://www.e-ariana.com/ariana/eariana.nsf/7eca40d3d348841987256b79007d1cb8/bfa4d81413fa0f11872576570050fb59!OpenDocument>.

³⁴ Ibid.

Taliban when Western forces withdraw from Afghanistan.³⁵ Despite being competitors of US in global politics, China is not interested to play any substantial security role inside Afghanistan; a decision consistent with its non-interference policies abroad. Despite Chinese refusal to play a direct security role in Afghanistan, it has offered to train a small number of Afghan police, particularly in anti-terrorism techniques.

The strategy of China has been that, it supports the international community in its efforts in Afghanistan, but stays away from direct military involvement.³⁶ China's main concern is about how post-2014 Afghanistan will affect China's internal security. "China's first concern is national security and to make sure the Uighurs don't get more strength."³⁷ Despite an uncertain security situation in Afghanistan, China is making a heavy investment there which is indicator of its optimism and desire for a stable Afghanistan based on mutual respect and non-interference. As agreed in 2012, during the visit of China's domestic security chief, Mr Zhou Yongkang, the most senior Chinese official to visit Afghanistan in last 50 years, China will help train the Afghan police force. Under the new agreements, around 300 Afghan police officers will be sent to China for training over the next four years.³⁸

The Regional Scenario: Soundings from SCO

In June 2012, China clearly expressed its desire to play a greater role for the stabilization of Afghanistan alongside Russia. President Hu said, "We will continue to manage regional affairs by ourselves, guarding against shocks from turbulence outside the region, and will play a bigger role in Afghanistan's peaceful reconstruction."³⁹ China emphasized strengthening of communication, coordination and cooperation in dealing with major international and regional issues and is looking for new and fresh cooperation models and proposed ways to identify non-resource sectors as a new priority for economic cooperation.

According to Mr Zhang Deguang, Chairman of China Foundation of International Studies (CFIS), "SCO can and will play a bigger role in Afghanistan after the NATO withdrawal."⁴⁰ It would like SCO to play a part in the stabilization of Afghanistan. Since most of the SCO countries are geographically contiguous with Afghanistan, thus vulnerable to spillover effects of terrorism and Afghan-originated drug trafficking. Owing to these facts, they have an interest to stabilize this country. As presumed by scholars, the biggest test of the SCO would be its developmental role in Afghanistan post 2014. He added that China would provide \$10 billion for undertaking projects in the SCO countries.

Afghanistan has been given observer status of SCO. China is looking for the reconstruction of Afghanistan,

³⁵ In this regard it is pertinent to mention that China also took the East Turkistan movement in very important manner, and tried to resolve it and contain involvement of Pakistani extremist elements. For this purpose Pakistan had to show a greater level interest, and even besides General Musharraf, Qazi Hussain Ahmed the then Amir of Jamaat E Islami paid visits to China. Thus it makes sense that how important this region is for China-Afghan relations.

³⁶ Jane Perlez, "China Shows Interest in Afghan Security, Fearing Taliban Would Help Separatists", *New York Times*, June 8, 2012, accessed at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/09/world/asia/china-signals-interest-in-afghanistan-after-nato-leaves.html?_r=0.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Gleb Bryanski and Chris Buckley, "China's Hu sees role for regional bloc in Afghanistan", *Reuter*, June 06, 2012, accessed http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-06-06/news/sns-rt-us-china-russia-hu-afghanistanbre85504t-20120605_1_afghanistan-sco-china-s-hu.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

following the pull out of the NATO and US forces. Chinese President Mr Hu assured President Karazai for a continued support. He said that, "China will continue actively participating in international and regional cooperation concerning Afghanistan."⁴¹

In a statement, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi said that member states should boost security collaboration to safeguard regional stability, including stepping up the fight against terrorism, autonomy and extremism, optimizing the model for cooperation in ensuring security for major international events, and carrying on joint anti-terrorism exercises. Yang also called for better links among the SCO member states, boosting infrastructural construction, further facilitating trade and investment and expanding cooperation in sectors such as finance, transport, energy, telecommunication and agriculture amid the economic slump.

During 12th Summit of SCO, surprisingly, India also backed Chinese call for the SCO's role in Afghanistan. Indian External Affairs Minister S.M Krishna; heading the Indian delegate said that SCO is a promising and alternative regional platform for the discussion on the rapidly changing situation in Afghanistan.⁴² For the stabilization of the region, Uzbek President Islam Karimov, emphasized for a political and economic cooperation and stepping up anti-terrorism efforts among the SCO countries.

Being a rising power and major Afghan neighbour, China has lot of stakes in Afghanistan, including security concerns to its own western autonomous region, Xinjiang. Therefore, restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan is in the interest of China, besides this being essential for the Afghan masses. Apart from its own interest for stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan, there is acceptability for China among Afghan masses and leadership alike.

Contemporary Debate on Sino-Afghan Relationship

Despite the fact that China has made massive investments in Afghan mineral sector, yet there is a huge non-clarity in its strategic and economic outlook in Afghanistan. Until this time, China has invested \$4.4 billion through its two state-owned companies i.e. Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC) and Jiangxi Copper Corporation (JCCL) at Mes Aynak, one of the world's largest copper mines.⁴³ As per US Geological Survey (USGS), "Afghanistan may be sitting on mineral wealth worth around \$1 trillion."⁴⁴ Besides, it has huge lithium deposits, which could turn the country into, 'Saudi Arabia of lithium'. Estimates of its iron ores are of some \$421 billion's worth and there may be copper of worth \$273 billion.⁴⁵ Apart, in the north, "Afghanistan sits atop the lower end of the hydrocarbon rich Amu Darya basin."⁴⁶

There are two opinions about this imprecision in the Chinese policy on Afghanistan. First, on the issues of its security, China is benefitting from the NATO and US presence in Afghanistan, thus, would not like to involve itself deep into Afghan security affairs, which may invite US annoyance. Chinese security planners feel that, had there been no foreign troops in Afghanistan, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda operatives would have enlarged their sway of militancy into its already disturbed autonomous region, Xinjiang, where Uyghur population is hostile to the Chinese rule. Since Afghan

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Manish Chand, "India Backs SCO's Bigger Afghan Role", *Russia-India Report*, June 8, 2012, accessed http://indrus.in/articles/2012/06/08/india_backs_scos_bigger_afghan_role_15936.html.

⁴³ Erica S. Downs, China Buys into Afghanistan, *SAIS Review*, February 21, 2013.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Taliban and Al-Qaeda have been fighting against the NATO and US troops, therefore, China got a leeway for improving the security apparatus in this unstable region. However, there have been widespread demonstrations and violence in this region, mainly undertaken by East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Occasionally China blames foreign troops and their spying agencies for fueling this violence. However, it is perceived that, China has been an indirect beneficiary of this foreign presence in Afghanistan. The blurriness in the Chinese policy on Afghanistan can be attributed to this particular beneficial aspect.

The second opinion is that, China is only interested in the economic benefits of the region; Central Asia and Afghanistan, thus, where felt secured, made economic investments; Mes Ayank and Amu Darya being the prominent examples. Proponents of this opinion also argue that, China waits for the right time for its future strategy in Afghanistan for its intimate involvement. This opinion strengthened the ground realities and statement of the former Chinese President, Mr Hu, who for the first time in June 2012, said that China would play a major role for the stabilization of the Afghanistan in the post 2014 scenario. There is a strong feeling in the United States and Western academic circles and think tanks besides their policy makers that, whereas, NATO and US forces fought the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other militants in Afghanistan, China garnered the fruits of their sacrifices, thus remained the true beneficiary. According to Raffaello Pantucci, a senior research fellow at RUSI, "Beijing correctly assumed that NATO's presence in Afghanistan would mean regional terrorist networks would remain focused on attacking Alliance forces rather than stirring up trouble in neighboring countries like China."⁴⁷

Chinese new leadership is zealous for improving its ties with its neighbors. In this regard, President Xi Jinping visualizes those good neighborly relations would help China's own development and the goals of achieving a prosperous, stable and a modern country. On Oct 24, 2013, while addressing the party's central committee's political bureau on 'Diplomatic work on neighboring countries' President Xi said in his major policy statement that, dealings with neighboring countries "should have a three-dimensional, multi-element perspective, beyond time and space." Owing to geopolitics and geo-economics' significance of the region, President Xi sought common grounds and converging interests of China and other regional countries. The new leadership is striving to promote friendship among its neighbors and other regional countries, on all issues; political, security and economics. Mr Xi said that, "we must have deeper security cooperation and closer people-to-people ties."

There can be no second opinion about the intent of the Chinese leadership for promoting good relationship with neighbors, but, exclusively on Afghanistan, Chinese strategy remains indistinct. During the visit of Central Asian region, President Xi did discuss the post 2014 Afghan scenario with the regional leadership, however, it has not come out with a clear strategy, as how to deal with the post 2014 Afghanistan. After negotiation of Bilateral Security Agreement between US and Afghanistan, the situation would not be the one Chinese might have appreciated the complete pull out of NATO and US troops from its neighborhood by December 2014. The scenario is changed now and US would like to keep 10,000-12,000 troops on its well defended and strategically located military bases. Besides, taking care of security aspects of Afghanistan, where primarily, the Afghan National Army would be responsible for its security, these bases would

⁴⁷ Raffaello Pantucci, "China's Afghanistan Challenge", *Diplomat*, April 5, 2013, accessed <http://thediplomat.com/2013/04/chinas-afghanistan-challenge/>.

pursue the US strategic interests in the region. Surely, a rising China and resurgent Russia stands out in the future radar of the United States, and the super power may not like any obstruction in the exercise of its sole power status at the global level.

Notwithstanding these ground realities, China has its strategic and economic interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Since Afghanistan has yet to come out from a foreign invasion, thus it is still indecisive to take a clear line of action about its future correlation. The change of Afghan leadership in April 2014 is yet another factor the Chinese may be waiting for. The Central Asian states however are apprehensive that growing Chinese influence may affect the regional affairs in two aspects. Firstly, it will invite other international competitors like United States and Russia to enlarge their sway or else to counter the Chinese influence in Central Asia. Already the major powers seem at loggerheads over their economic interests in the region. Secondly, the enhanced Chinese influence may convert the region as vassal states of the former. These republics are not ready to repeat the history through subordination of another major power after experiencing the despotic policies of former Soviet Union. Besides, the region is already aligned with multiple regional organizations; Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and security setup like Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Being the hub of hydrocarbon reserves and Eurasian in character, Europe and US would like the region to be aligned with them. Certainly, the Chinese soft power image and economic incentives are rewarding aspect for the Central Asian Republics in the continuation of their economic relationship with China.

Owing to the chaotic situation in Afghanistan, which is likely to persist beyond 2014, China appears unsure of its future role. Even its companies involved in Aynak copper mines are seeking re-negotiation of the terms of deal, as besides the difficult terrain, security is a biggest challenge for them to move ahead freely. Whereas majority of Afghans desire Chinese economic investment in their country, there may be some people who view the Chinese move just self-beneficial for the Chinese to advance its economic interests, instead of being beneficial for Afghanistan and its masses. Together with economic investments, Chinese firms have to provide employment opportunities to the locals. Raffaello Pantucci, a scholar at RUSI, conducted a field survey in some parts of Afghanistan and found that, “Kabul – China’s optics in Afghanistan are not good. After a week of travelling around talking to Afghans and others in Kabul, the general consensus is that China is doing little to contribute on the ground. In fact, the perception remains that China is trying to draw profit from Afghanistan’s abundant natural resources while giving little in return.”⁴⁸

It is also perceived in Afghanistan that, unlike NATO and US, China has contributed little in terms of reconstruction of the country and provision of facilities to its masses. Even India has developed a lot in communication infrastructure and contributed in reconstruction of educational institutions, health services, transport services and training of the Afghan military personnel, its bureaucracy and intelligence agency (NDS). India also provides thousands of educational scholarships to Afghan students per year. China may be found more wanting in provisioning most of these facilities, which is extremely essential to win the hearts and mind of a common Afghan.

The Future Prospects

⁴⁸Raffaello Pantucci, “How China is seen in Afghanistan”, *Oriental Morning Post*, July 5, 2013, accessed December 16, 2013 <http://raffaellopantucci.com/category/press/oriental-morning-post>.

According to Davood Moradiyan of Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, Kabul, “The Chinese are ambiguous. They don’t want the Taliban to return to power and are concerned about a vacuum after 2014 that the Taliban could fill, but they also don’t like having U.S. troops in their neighbourhood,”⁴⁹ Definitely, China is not going to jump into Afghanistan after US pulls out. However, it is likely that it would have a new and a renewed approach towards its immediate neighbourhood. Being the second largest economy, China needs Afghanistan. Indeed, “If you are able to see a more or less stable situation in Afghanistan, if it becomes another relatively normal Central Asian state, China will be the natural beneficiary.”⁵⁰

According to Andrew Small, a China expert at The German Marshall Fund of the United States, an American research institute. “If you look across Central Asia that is what has already happened. ... China is the only actor which can foot the level of investment needed in Afghanistan to make it succeed and stick it out.”⁵¹ A stable Afghanistan is of vital importance to China for its reaching over to Eurasia; nevertheless it cannot afford to stand aside following the U.S. troop withdrawal and in the process of political transition. The strategic partnership Agreement signed between China and Afghanistan in 2012 signifies Chinese interests in Post 2014 Afghanistan. China fears that if Taliban come to power, it will have a great impact on the “separatist group, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM).”⁵² China has a greater role in Afghanistan in any case, for this purpose China has already many benefits from the pre-Soviet era agreements with Afghanistan.

As far as Chinese policies towards Afghanistan are concerned, it goes beyond saying that China would like stability in Afghanistan. The Central Asian gas pipeline is only the most vivacious illustration of China's rising stakes (and its new vulnerabilities) in that county. Meanwhile, there are also indications that China is re-evaluating and reconsidering its responsibility as far as Central Asia is concerned, against the conditions of the renewed thrust by Moscow on Eurasian integration (with apathetic fallouts until now) and the departure of Western forces from Afghanistan and the ebb of US concern in the region that may proceed. Afghanistan pledges to be a “stage” where China can work with the US on regional security issues. Though having conflicts over few issues with US, China carries the geopolitical influence that can build all the disparities to the victory of the US regional policy.

In the post 2014, China will stride carefully in assuming any major responsibility in order to bring harmony in Afghanistan, yet it intends to keep at bay from the wreckage of the war, security vacuity and show a low-esteem to a long-term US troop presence in Afghanistan that is too close to its borders with the Central Asian region. The point is, while China would give humbug to envisage a key role for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in stabilizing post-2014 Afghanistan, its actual enunciation remains to be on the bilateral proposals. From the US perspective, this has repercussions for the great-power enmity in Central Asia. China is ever more restructuring Central Asia to turn into its

⁴⁹Gary, “Afghanistan,...First Russia, then the USA, Next China”, January 30, 2013, accessed http://www.notsosilentthoughts.com/2013_01_01_archive.html.

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⁵¹ “China Could Prove Ultimate Winner in Afghanistan”, January 27, 2013, accessed <http://www.phantomreport.com/china-could-prove-ultimate-winner-in-afghanistan>.

⁵²Scott Greene, “China, Afghanistan Deepen Ties”, *China Digital Times*, June 11, 2012, accessed <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2012/06/china-afghanistan-deepen-ties/>.

backyard rather than Russia's, and this will carry certain regional responsibilities that China has not yet figured out how to address and for that very reason China will have to construct an appropriate strategy for Central Asia, besides Afghanistan.

Enhanced Role of Regional Powers

In the post-2014 state of affairs, the regional countries will have chance to place better role in Afghanistan. Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has recognized Afghanistan as its observer member which has proved itself tangential as yet, now it is preparing itself to presume a larger task in Afghanistan. As foreign interest remains focused on Afghanistan following the exit of foreign troops, China has signed a series of agreements with Afghanistan and anticipates to maintain its policy of resource mobilization through “investment in mining and communications”, and guarantees to “facilitate, instruct, support and equip Afghan police.” However, the question of security remains the overriding issue. The SCO countries do not have the capital in order to utilize in Afghanistan, nevertheless they can present support for capacity building. There exists likelihood that Afghanistan will develop good relations with Central Asia in the post-2014 phase, as there is least probability that Afghanistan might come out as a “Transit Nucleus” between the Indian Sub-Continent and Central Asia. Apart from Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, it can yield considerable profits from ‘overland trade’.

CONCLUSIONS

To promote stability in Afghanistan, there is a pressing need for regional countries to play a vital but neutral role in Afghanistan through a regional co-operation mechanism. This all has to be done, while respecting the territorial veracity and sovereignty of Afghanistan viz-a-viz its neighbors. The geo-economic significance of Afghanistan as well as massive Chinese investments in that country indicates a desire by both countries to upgrade their relations and uphold economic cooperation. By means of regional co-operation order, the Afghan imbroglio, uncertain security situation, fragile economy and divided society can be brought back to normalcy, whereby Afghanistan can establish friendly relations with the rest of world. For this very purpose, China should clearly enunciate its post 2014 policy for the stabilization of Afghanistan through its economic investment and reconstruction. It should also contribute in provision of facilities like communication network, educational and health services and impart training to Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police on the lines of US and may other regional and international countries. Surely, compared to the West's increasingly discomfort in last decade, China can set itself up to guarantee a peaceful, secure and stable Afghanistan and consequently a peaceful, secure and stable South Asia in the Asian century. In fact, the rising power of China cannot afford a confrontational approach on its neighborhood and particularly in Afghanistan, where NATO and U.S still maintain their ascendancy. However, China considers constructive engagement with Afghanistan and Central Asia for its subsequent influence and economic cum political gains beyond the region through Eurasia.

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